

The View of Woman in Rapanui Society Part 1. Women in Myths and Legends¹

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Since the eighteenth century there have been many compilations of myths and legends about Rapanui culture. In some cases, there are different versions of a story and many of these have survived until the present time.

Oral traditions are presently limited to the most elderly members of the community, and they correspond with surprising accuracy to various accounts compiled by scientists since the beginning of the 20th century. Certainly each narration exhibits some variations incorporated by the narrator, resulting from a spirit of creativity and fantasy. However, the basics of the traditional stories are retained.

Because they are removed from daily life, a traditional narrative with its fantastic episodes is not even questioned by the modern storyteller who may, at odd moments, assert "that's how it must have been back in those days". Myths as well as legends allow the reliving of an original reality and respond in some way to a religious necessity and moral aspirations (Eliade 1978:26).

Myth is "a true story because it is sacred, exemplary and meaningful" (Eliade 1978:8). For the storyteller, it has validity and immediacy when situated in the real world. Each place that is described has a authenticated reality, as do certain details such as the existence of particular caves, houses, petroglyphs, etc. that have a tangible meaning for the listener, as well.

The mythic way of thinking that contains a rational answer about the world of the most elderly appears incomprehensible to new generations. At times it is questioned in an attempt to find a logical explanation for the episodes that escape the practical thinking of present man. And thus we collect a series of tales; some differ in the narration of certain episodes while some simply lack the same material.

Myth provides models of human conduct and, in some ways, provides a key for contemporary behavioral patterns, such as how man has come to be what he is today. Frequently, common patterns of behavior exist without reason, under the given circumstances. These are nothing more than the endurance of certain behavior that was established since time immemorial in myths and legends, helping us to better understand the behavior patterns of contemporary Rapanui.

A legend that is not known by all becomes, for some, a valued possession. On certain occasions it is adapted in its transmission according to the position the individual has in the community or to what the listeners want to hear. In a certain way, there is more recognition for one who can recount an episode, a legend, or a myth from personal experience or from oral transmission received from important people in the past. This confers special power, more than that which is provided for the one who is acquainted the story from literary sources.

In general, Rapanui narration reflects the lifestyle of antiquity, and it appears intimately tied to the world of gods and spirits, to mana, or power transmitted by the gods to men, and all of

the taboos or prohibitions that surround mana. There is the presence of the supernatural in the everyday world through gods and spirits with determined functions and places of residence. Some spirits or demigods are said to teach certain activities, acting as intermediaries between the world of the spirits, Ovakevake, and human beings.

In the Rapanui pantheon, no feminine deities appear except in the narration of a tablet with ancient writing, *kohau rongo rongo*, collected by William Thomson in 1886. This chant tells the origin of certain things, as the result of the union of gods and goddesses:

God Atua Matariri and the goddess Taporo produced thistle.
God Ahimahima Marao and the goddess Takihi Tupufema produced rocks.
God Aoevai and the goddess Kava Kohekoe produced medicine.
God Matua anua and the goddess Kappipiri Aaitau produced the miro tree.
God Augingieai and the goddess Kai Humutoti produced the paper mulberry tree.
God Hiti and the goddess Kia heta produced the tea plant.
God Atua and the goddess Katei produced bunch grass.
God Ahen and the goddess Vaua produced fine grass.
God Agekai and the goddess Hepeue produced obsidian.
God Viri Koue and the goddess Ariugarehe Uruharero produced the morning-glory plant.
God Atua Metua and the goddess Kariritunaria produced the morning-glory plant.
God Atua Metua and the goddess Kariritunaria produced coconuts.
God Atua Metua and goddess Ki te Vuhi o Atua produced the toromiro tree.
God Metua and the goddess Tapuhavaoatua produced Hibiscus. (Thomson 1889:521-2)

The narration continues naming of twenty gods and goddesses, creators of the blue-leafed plant, white ash, flies, roaches and boobies, leaves, ants, sugar cane, arrowroot, yams, squash, stars, fowls, vermilion, sharks, porpoise, rock fish, life, luck, and men.

After the gods came the *aku aku*, minor gods or spirits, with names and fixed places of residence. They were of both sexes and they married, sometimes with common folks.

Within the category of "teaching" spirits are two female spirits Vi'e Moko and Vi'e Kena, (lizard woman and bird woman) who introduced the practice of tattooing. They joined two mortal men, Heru and Patu, with whom each had a child. The youths are tattooed by their mothers, who return to the world of the spirits after their children are grown and can take care of themselves. Along with their tattoos, the youths received

their mothers' power that makes them superior to common men. The tale extols the beauty that the youths inherited, as it does the beauty of mortal women who appear at the end of the tale and who are chosen instead of some ugly women who love them equally. The latter die from their desire for the youths.

Father Sebastián Englert recorded a lovely version from old Tori, which told of how he had seen a woman sent by Make Make, the supreme god and creator. She had a dress like a cumulus cloud, "...*rangi puna tea tea o te kahu*, and she was next to a rainbow that stretched from 'Anakena to Ovahe. In various narrations, the rainbow symbolizes the bridge between the world of the spirits and the earthly world.

Another tale that includes a lesson concerns a spirit woman who is taken by the spirits Tare and Rapahango to a common man who wanted a wife. The spirits imposed the condition that he was to treat the woman well, not to mistreat her, and not be jealous if she should speak with another man. The man does not keep his promise and he beats her when she returns from bringing the fire. He sees the face of the woman with its *kie'a* (red pigment) streaked by the rain and he thinks that she has been with another man. The man is punished when the spirit woman flees through a rainbow from the place called "*ko te puku ui Atua*". At the end of the tale the man shows remorse and cries.

A story condemning the mistreatment of women appears in another legend, but with a different perspective. This is the story of Aio, who routinely beat his wife until she was unable to tolerate the situation any longer, and killed him in his sleep. She goes to Vai Atare along with her children, but forgets one of them who cries for days from hunger next to the cadaver, drinking the spilt blood of his father. After a few days, an old woman found him, cleaned him and cared for him until he became a young man. The young man then took vengeance on his mother and her family by offering them an *umu*, or feast. He invited all his relatives to eat inside the house which he filled with food. Then he closed the door, and set the house on fire. His mother observed the incident from outside until nothing remained. He then loaded her with a bundle of *mahute* (bark cloth) to which he added more and more weight until the woman died. Thus the initial suffering of the mistreated woman took second place to the murder of the father and the abandonment of the child. The collection of stories about this legend notes that the father was named Aio and that the old woman gave the foundling his father's name, but it is possible that the father was called Io and the child a'lo, since the prefix "a" implies "of" and was commonly used to indicate kinship with the father, or "son of".

Spirit women also came to the earth world. They fell in love and sometimes wished to take young men away to their world, as in the story of Ure a Vai a Nuhe and Ure a Oho Vehi. In the first story, the man appears to be alienated in the eyes of the people, for he does unusual things such as changing himself into a fishhook. He is a handsome young man, and attracts the spirit women Kuha and Rati. In the second story the man is abducted by the female spirits Kava Kava Aro and Kava Kava Atua who try to poison him, but he is helped by an old sorceress who fed him and took him away from the women. In both cases, the young men are handsome and do uncommon things that bring abundance and prosperity, that is they have a special talent

or mana, that made them different from common men. They managed to remove themselves from the influence of the spirit women through the help of a sorceress, or of smoke, which throws off the female spirits' sense of smell when seeking a man.

There is another tale of two spirit women who come near Rano Aroi and are attracted by a perfume coming from Rano Raraku. But two very handsome young men, Hina and Kerama, tell them that the aroma comes from them, urging them to stay. The spirits stay with them, but then discover that the aroma is from the volcano. They abandoned the young men because they masturbated with stones. Here appears a new element: condemning masturbation while men are living with women.

There are few tales about mortal women being pursued by male spirits, but these all have a common thread: the beauty of the women produced an attraction for the spirits. It is common to find situations in the stories where a woman was confronted with trickery and always with a promise, such as the case of a bad spirit Rae Rae Hou who promised a fish to the young Toi, taking her to various places. Each time he promised to give it to her if she would go to yet another place. But a positive spirit warned Toi of the trap. The young woman ran off and hid with an old woman who took care of her. The young woman warned her people about this negative spirit who was then captured and killed, and whose blood was transformed into a conch shell. The following year the young woman went to gather shellfish, upon trying to take a conch shell, she was carried out to sea by a wave and disappeared.

The story of Uho describes a very beautiful young woman bathing at the seashore who was robbed when a turtle took the belt she had left on a rock. She asked the turtle to return it to her, and he promised to do so if she would swim toward him. Uho swam behind the turtle until she came to a distant land, and there she met Mahuna te Ra'a, whom she married. But homesick for her land and her family, she decided to return home. At the seashore she met the turtle again and asked him to take her back to her own land, but he in return asked for her vagina. Both stories finish with possession by the spirits, completing a cycle that sometimes seems predetermined.

Along with spirits that were present in the world of the mortals, mythical ancestors of great importance also came forth. These were ancestors who had great power in life. Their mana outlived them, especially through the statues, or *moai*, which represented them.

Among the stone statues, few are figures of women: only two were in process of being carved in the quarry of Rano Raraku, and none are known to have been installed on an altar. In general, women were excluded from religious rituals, except those women who had direct kinship with the *ariki* (king), such as the eldest daughter or certain women with great power who always figured in the stories. The latter are characterized as old women and sorceresses, who had the ability to intervene in the inanimate world, and could transform themselves into diverse objects, as did Pikea Uri, the old woman who turned into a black crab. There is also a tale about the old woman with a long arm who caught and ate children.

Old women with power are present in the narratives. In

many cases they assume the care of abandoned children, such as Tuki Hake He Vari and Aio, who in turn take care of the old women by fishing and farming for their food. Great is the curse that an old woman casts when a group of fishermen left her only the claw of a lobster at a feast. Confronted with this circumstance, she pronounced the incantation *ka hihinga korua konga kope*, upon which the *moai* fell and the carvers dispersed, not carving any more statues (Englert 1980:101).

Throughout these stories the importance of the adoption of abandoned children is extolled, as is the importance of caring for the adoptive mother in her old age by the adopted child.

Power or *mana* also resided in certain women who knew the origin of medicine and who are called healers. Certain prohibitions or taboos surrounded them while they were collecting and preparing medicine; these included solitude and abstinence from sexual relations.

All through the narratives women had a series of prohibitions such as those that must be followed with a first-born son. She must not eat above him and she must leave him at her side. When he begins to walk, she must not eat what he brings in his hands. When he is grown, she must not eat what he carries around his neck, but must eat what he carries in his hands. The fish he catches must be marked, for the mother may not eat these, only those caught by the father. These prohibitions are linked to the success the young man will have in his life. Although these elements appear in certain narratives, there is no legend or myth that justifies such prohibitions; however, we can infer that women were attributed great power, sufficient to break a taboo, such that she could not enter certain planted fields thus preventing the plants from drying.

The belief in Polynesian society was that the feminine sexual organs had a magical destructive power and, as a result, the influence of women, in certain circumstances, could be dangerous by absorbing the power of protective spirits in certain areas and thus removing the taboo (Lee 1992:194).

One of the most common designs in the island's petroglyphs is that of the vulva, or *komari*, of which there are various interpretations, such as absorbing negative spirits existing in a specific place. Perhaps joined with this belief is the practice of stretching the clitoris, as many passages attest, such as that of Renga Roiti, a girl who lived as a recluse in her house. She was cared for by her mother who bathed her, brushed her hair, put orange pigment (*pua*) on her face and stretched her clitoris. There also exists information about young women who lived confined in caves and during certain ceremonies, such as that of the *poki manu*, or bird-child, went to 'Orongo, and at the ceremonial sector called Mata Ngarau, a priest measured their clitorises. Many are the images that remain in stone relating to this element. Following this ceremony the young women rejoined everyday life and married.

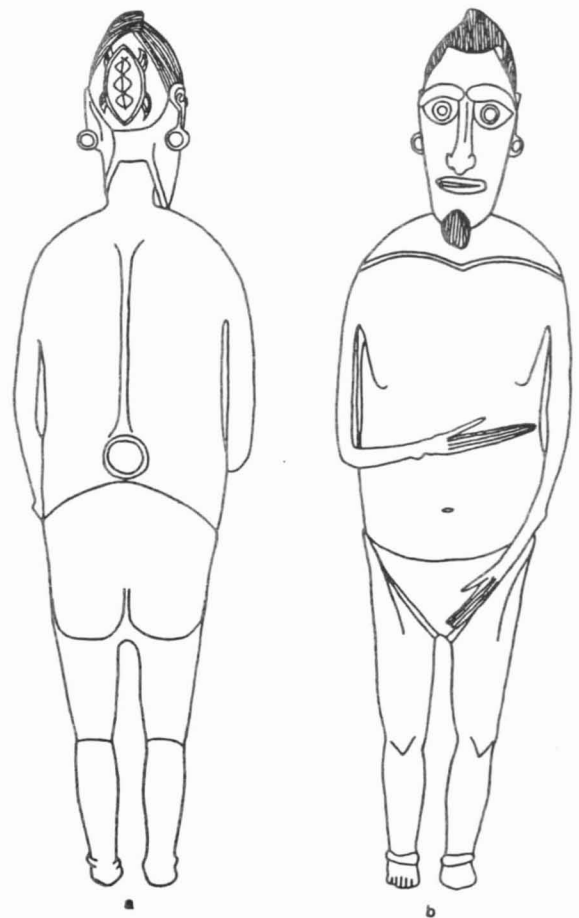
There are, in examples of traditional wood carving, some feminine figures such as the *moai pa'a pa'a*, which were hung at the entrance of houses, perhaps as small protective figures against evil spirits. In fact they represented certain spirits that appeared to the king Tu'u Ko Iho in a dream, but there is also another version that describes three beautiful nude women who visited the king in his house. When he asked their names, they

replied Pa'a Pa'a Hiro, Pa'a Pa'a Kirangi, and To'o Tahe Turu Mai Te Rangi, and then they disappeared into the heights. The *ariki*, inspired by the spirit women, carved their figures which he later hung in his house.

In the legends and myths, women appear to be always preoccupied with work, such as making fire, preparing an *umu* (earth oven), digging sweet potatoes and other tubers from the garden, fishing and gathering shellfish from the rocks along the shore, taking care of the children, sewing *hami* (loincloths) and *mahute* (barkcloth) capes, weaving mats, baskets and making a variety of hats.

Motherhood was highly regarded, as is reflected in the story of a woman called Rere Ao, or "kidnapper". When she could not have a child, she stole one and simulated a birth, and upon being found out was ridiculed by people who gave her the nickname by which she was known.

In general, legends suggest the existence of monogamy, but there is a tale of two men Hamea and Ra'a, said to have cohabited with a woman who gave both of them numerous progeny and from which descended the clans of the Miru tribe, the



A wood carving of a *moai pa'a pa'a*, collected in 1870. These female figures have elaborate head designs and beards; the significance of the latter is unknown. It is possible this type of carving relates to the legend of the female spirits carved by the king (drawing by K. Conti, from Seaver 1993:192).

Hamea and the Ra'a. Oral traditions exist that chiefs or persons of rank could have several wives, but this does not appear in the legends. It is possible that this occurred at a later period, when thousands of men were taken away from the island as slaves, leaving mostly women, children and the elderly. But if such were the case, it was for a short time only because the slave raids coincided with the arrival of the missionaries, and this meant the questioning of all conduct that was not within the norms of Christian morals.

In general, women had freedom within marriage to abandon a man, be it for his abuse, as in the legend of Aio, or for love of another man, as in the episode of the woman who fell in love with Moa Ure Nui (the rooster with the large penis). Upon learning of this, the husband murdered the lover and buried him in an *ahu*; despairing, she took the penis of her lover and wrapped it in a piece of *mahute* and cried for days. Her husband returned to look for her and destroyed her possession, saying: "your man has returned." The story concluded by saying she no longer cried because what she wanted was now destroyed.

Oral information given to the missionary Father Gaspar Zumborn revealed that a woman could lose her life if she were found committing adultery (Coll 1973), but Geiseler (1883) added that happened only if she were the wife of a king.

In some cases, a father's authority was so great that it would force a woman to abandon her home at the father's request, as in the tale about a woman from Vaimata who married a man from Tahai. There came a period of scarcity during which all they had to eat was fish. One day the father came to visit and, after a few days of noting the lack of food, asked his daughter to return with him to Vaimata. The daughter agreed, but with great sorrow at leaving her daughter and her husband. Once in her father's house, he cooked her sweet potatoes and would not allow her to return. The grieving husband failed to eat, and died. We see in this story the power of a father over his child, as well as the importance of food. Food gives a special and respected standing to those men who can achieve prosperity through the abundance of their plantings. Behind abundance can be seen the influence of spirits and the existence of mana, or god-given supernatural power.

Numerous legends praise the husband or suitor for what he possesses and for giving food to a woman's parents. This is corroborated in the episode of Renga Roiti who was abducted by a young man, Repa a Punga, with her consent. The young woman's mother complained until the young man made two traditional *umu* due to the pregnancy of the young woman; one in honor of his wife and the other in honor of his mother-in-law. After he brought her food, she wondered why they had not told her that Repa a Punga was a good man.

The bond between a daughter and her father extended to her brothers. There are many legends featuring the way in which sisters care for a brother, as in the tale of Nune who lived in a time of war, hidden near Ahu Hanga Ho'onu. Every day his three sisters took food to him, but one day they were caught by the enemy and killed. Despairing, Nune made some barkcloth and left it to dry in the sun while he wept for his sisters. Many warriors came to kill Nune, but he killed them all. He moved to Ahu Vai a Hare, taking the cloth, and many more

warriors came, and he killed them. He moved to Hua, where he clasped the barkcloth and killed all the warriors of that place while he wept for his sisters.

Generally, in all the accounts, a woman goes to live in the land of the husband when she marries. Often, a woman's nostalgia for her parents caused her to return to her land, as in the story of Uho, who is consoled by her husband and her mother-in-law, who worried about her sadness. Even so, Uho returned to her family, magically taking along her daughter.

Many legends tell of vengeance; generally, it is the women who are killed along with their children, and then their families avenge them. Such are the tales of Atoro Humu Kena, in which the mother was killed, or the death of the wife of Moko and his daughters in a cannibalistic ritual that left only the victims' fingernails behind. In view of this situation of vengeance and pain, the early missionaries commented that, because they felt protected, women were the first to embrace Christianity.

The story of Pepe establishes how women were vulnerable to the decisions of men. Pepe of the Miru tribe was being pursued because he was a cannibal and ate people from other tribes. He took refuge and told his wife that, if she is discovered, she is not to reveal his hiding place. He told her to look for a safe place for herself and his son. But the wife was found by his enemies, and they threatened to kill her if she did not reveal Pepe's hiding place. The woman informed them about the hiding place, and they captured him. Upon his capture, Pepe told his enemies to kill his son first and, cursing his wife, asked for her death, also. His wife and son were killed, and then Pepe. The promise to the woman was not respected, and the words of the warrior, although an enemy, were fulfilled.

What stands out among the approximately 180 myths and legends that have been studied, is the existence of a patriarchal society. Women, however, had the freedom to make decisions about their life, and at times even controlled great conflicts. The majority of the accounts refer to men steeped in mana, creators, and great power over nature. The presence of feminine spirits, with the power to join with mortal men but the ability to leave them when faced with particular circumstances, in a way legitimizes the behavior of women of liberty to make decisions about their personal life.

The narratives exalt beauty in men as well as in women, a trait that attracts spirits much more than ugliness. Men and women are preoccupied with their bodies, with making them beautiful with tattoos and body paint and adorning them with pendants, capes and loincloths, and with hats of many shapes.

Legend refers to the mistreatment and deception of women by men as a means of obtaining what the man desires; however, this behavior was condemned in the narratives by allowing women the freedom to escape from such situations.

Women appear to have been bound to home, motherhood and the care of the children, but they also have the option to give a child away in adoption, generally to a childless or elderly woman so that, when grown, they can care for the adoptive parents.

Adultery seems excused if it is forgiven by the deceived spouse. Allusion to adultery on the part of the man does not appear in the legends, which leads to the suggestion that it did not

exist and that if it did, it was accepted. Love is generally expressed in the importance given to the physical union, but is easily ended when faced with an adverse situation, usually caused by the man. An exception is in the episode of Hotu Matu'a, the legendary king who left his wife because, during their entire life together, she hid from him the truth of his illegitimate birth. Had he known he was a bastard, he would not have emigrated to Rapa Nui, so far away from his ancestral land.

Women seem to be cared for by the husband and his family during pregnancy, which highlights the importance of procreation and descendants, above all the male child rather than a girl child who will leave the paternal home when she marries. There existed a saying that when a girl was born, *pae pae kehe*, meaning she would leave at some time. The importance of *atariki*, or first-born son, is reaffirmed by the fact that all the children born from the union of women spirits and mortal men are male.

Women are attributed a negative and sometimes destructive force and, at other times, a positive force, such as that of healers, which made them independent in the face of certain situations.

The vision of spirits and their behavior were determinants of how one should be as an individual, and suggests behavior that is reinforced by the legends about the lives of heroes and significant persons. Many forms of behavior in contemporary Rapanui society are linked to the past, sometimes detached from any reason; the knowledge of the stories, legends and myths of the past that answer such questions are lost. It might appear that external cultural influences have exterminated these in part. But it has not been so; many of the traditions remain, above all in those who have opted to keep to themselves, connecting themselves to the land, and to silence.

Translation by Louise Noel.

FOOTNOTES

¹This article, the first in a series of three studies of gender relations in Rapanui society, provides a view of women as deduced from myths and legends. In subsequent issues, we will publish Parts 2 and 3. Part 2 examines the role of women as seen through the accounts of sailors, missionaries and scientists; and Part 3 discusses the role of women in the 20th century, through an analysis of collected life stories.

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